# External Debacle, Domestic Chance: The Interim Government in Prague during the Czech EU Presidency 2009

Schuch, Gereon; May, Marie-Lena

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Prof. Dr. Eberhard Sandschneider (Hrsg.)
Otto Wolff-Direktor des Forschungsinstituts der DGAP e.V.

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# External Debacle, Domestic Chance

## The Interim Government in Prague during the Czech EU Presidency 2009

Gereon Schuch and Marie-Lena May

*In the Czech Republic, the coalition government formed by Conservatives, Christian Democrats and Greens was overthrown by a no-confidence vote at the end of March 2009. Since May 8, a "cabinet of government officials" has assumed the official functions until early elections in mid-October—and this during the Czech EU Presidency. The approach of the opposition shows political irresponsibility and provincial narrow-mindedness. Even the former president and moral mentor of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, condemned the opposition for its stupidity and accused it of stabbing the government in the back.*

*The moment for the overthrow was most awkward. Yet the installation of the multipartisan cabinet of government officials and the upcoming early elections offer the Czech Republic the chance to finally constitute a capable government: a Grand Coalition of Conservatives and Social Democrats.*

A constant claim in politics is for sustainability. The Czech Republic has satisfied this demand, since it has sustainably disgraced itself at European level. Nicholas Sarkozy and other core-Europeans of the nice, old Europe will laugh up their sleeves and point to their warning words at the end of the "Grande Présidence." On March 24, the social democratic opposition (ČSSD) overthrew the coalition government led by the conservative Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek (ODS). He was forced to resign and from then on had only managerial responsibilities. The search for an interim government began and the Czech Republic fell head over heels into an actual cabinet crisis, which also had an impact on Europe: The domestic disempowerment of the Czech government has brought an interim presidency that is politically inexperienced and publicly unknown to the EU.

The European Union appears to be without guidance. The last EU summit in Prague on the Eastern Partnership turned out to be a meeting composed of substitutes, which is an indication of the perception and order of priorities in other European capitals. Thereby, the political matters of EU high-level meetings are reduced in rank and the efforts of the Czech government regarding agenda and outcome are foiled.

### The Czech Republic at Europe's Forefront

Yet, everything at the beginning looked different. After the Czech Republic assumed the EU presidency on January 1, 2009, the government in Prague seemed to be well-prepared for the "challenge of the EU presidency" against all prophecies of doom, and obtained acceptance, to the disapproval of president Václav Klaus, an avowed critic of the EU, who fiercely attacked the Treaty of Lisbon. However, the Czech parliament ratified the treaty in February, and only the ratification in the second chamber, the Senate, was missing.

The EU crisis management in Prague was challenged from the very beginning. The war in the Gaza Strip led to a discussion on the extent of European engagement in the Middle East, and the dispute between Russia and the Ukraine over gas clearly demonstrated the consequences of the EU's dependence on energy. Czech politicians and civil servants commuted between Moscow

and Kiev, fought against Sarkozy's action-taking and represented a whole region with their achievements: Even small, new democracies are able to successfully lead the European Union.

## The Overthrow of the Government

The happiness only lasted until March 24. Although the party leader of the social democratic opposition (ČSSD), Jiří Paroubek, had announced a truce with the coalition government for the time of the EU presidency and had hitherto presented himself pro-European, he launched a no-confidence vote against the government—and won.

Paroubek was able to do so with the help of two dissenters of Topolánek's ODS and two delegates of the small Green coalition party. In fact, it should have been an easy task: Topolánek's government had only 98 of the 200 seats in Parliament and had to rely on the goodwill of its independent deputies. The Prime Minister constantly stood in Paroubek's line of fire. Paroubek had already tried to overthrow the government four times. Evidently, the opposition leader himself did not believe he would succeed in his fifth attempt, since he lacked a political concept for a further course of action. Instead, he argued in favor of a continuation of the official functions by the previous government which should prepare early elections right after the EU presidency.

But this was reckoned without the President. Václav Klaus saw the chance to finally take down his party archfiend Topolánek and to dismantle the Treaty of Lisbon, which represented the symbol of all evil in Europe to him.

Topolánek had moved the ODS more and more away from its founding father and honorary chairman, Klaus, especially with regard to European issues. The latter resigned office at the end of 2008 after his favorite, Pavel Bém, had lost the election for party chair against Topolánek.

The "successful" no-confidence vote provided Klaus with great influence, as he could decide who should continue governing—and this during the Czech EU presidency and just shortly before the vote on the Treaty of Lisbon in the Czech Senate.

Václav Klaus denied Topolánek the mandate to form a government. Thus, the two big parties were forced to agree upon a—preferably apolitical—candidate, who would then be suggested to the President as interim premier in order to form a cabinet of state officials. Jan Fischer, the head of the Czech statistic agency, was chosen. He is unknown and inexperienced in the Czech political arena, and even less qualified in the European political scene.

But Klaus was enormously mistaken regarding to the second aspect: The Czech Senate did vote for the Treaty of Lisbon on May 6, and in this respect, also voted against the President.

## Fierce Criticism and Disappointed Citizens

The behavior of the opposition shows that even five years after joining the EU, domestic power intrigues and irresponsibility concerning European issues continue to dominate the political arena in Prague. The criticism was accordingly fierce both at home and abroad. Petr Drulák, the director of the well-respected Institute for International Relations in Prague, called for the replacement of the ruling political class and appealed for an electoral boycott in the conservative newspaper *Lidové noviny*. The response was also broadly negative in Germany. Klaus Brill, correspondent of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, spoke of a "deficit of statesmanlike sense of responsibility" and about the pronounced reluctance to find a democratic compromise amongst the political elite.

With regards to European politics, the successful no-confidence vote has to be regarded as a disaster. Topolánek himself called it an international disgrace. The ministers were forced to leave office in the middle of the presidency, and expertise and experience concerning the European political arena disappeared overnight.

The Minister for European Affairs, Alexandr Vondra, who was responsible for the conception of the presidency, had to hand over his duties to the former ambassador to NATO.

Meanwhile, many Czechs view the ado on Prague Castle and in the Parliament with a mixture of disinterest and dismay. Ninety percent of the Czech population is discontent with the current political situation. They followed the EU presidency with growing interest and were subsequently disappointed by their political elite. They will give a corresponding reply: The turnout of voters during the upcoming European elections will be low, and both big parties will lose support in the early elections in mid-October.

## Re-alignment of the Political Balance of Power in Prague

This development provides an opportunity for the Czechs to adjust their domestic balance of power. The government led by Mirek Topolánek stood on a shaky ground right from the beginning and only possessed the majority in parliament with the support of dissenters from the social democratic opposition. Thus, the government was only capable of acting and making decisions in a limited way. Early elections should have already broken up this stalemate earlier on.

Political instability, unfortunately, has a tradition in Prague. Since the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Czech Republic was governed for six years by ČSSD or ODS minority governments as no stable coalition governments could be formed. The country has had ten governments within its nearly 17 years of independence.

The EU presidency has eclipsed this situation. It seemed to be a multi-partisan consensus in order to not disgrace itself in Brussels and keep up appearances for half a year. This attempt failed, but the Czech politicians can now gather themselves.

With the "cabinet of government officials" headed by Fischer, the ODS and ČSSD have basically agreed upon a Grand Coalition. This was only possible because none of the outstanding protagonists of either party heads the government. The seemingly neutral government now provides some leeway for both camps since it is suggested that none of the parties actually bears the responsibility for political decisions. But without the support and the votes from parliament, there would be no "cabinet of state officials" as it requires parliamentary majorities and has nothing to do with the presidential system of the Weimar Republic that could bypass the parliament by presidential mandates. The Social Democrats have given Fischer a list of demands that must be met. Otherwise, they will not pass the vote of confidence in parliament which is due until June 6. Thus, the game continues.

## A Functioning Government is Needed

The personal power struggle between Topolánek and Paroubek must not determine politics after the elections in October. The antagonized protagonists need to come to the conclusion that they must resign from the political scene. Whether they are willing to do so remains dubious, but parties are always built from the bottom up regarding political content and personnel.

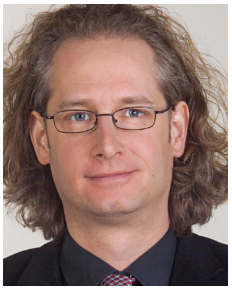
Therefore, moderate powers within the ODS and ČSSD should try to strengthen their influence and aim to form a Grand Coalition after the early elections. Such an alliance indeed is not the perfect solution, as the German example shows. In light of possible alternatives after the election in mid-October, however, this construction might be the best compromise to form a stable and functioning government, independent of party dissenters or the archaic Communist Party. Presumably, neither ČSSD nor ODS will be able to find a majority together with the smaller parties.

The Czech Republic needs a stable government in order to meet the challenges of the economic crisis that will have strongly affected Prague until October and to restrict the influence of the President. As it stands now, the President will not allow the European flag to be flown over Prague Castle until 2013. Under constitutional law, the possibilities of the President are limited, yet forceful actors are needed in order to

counter his political ego and his obsession with recognition. The Czech Parliament and Senate, through the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon, have shown that although Klaus may grumble, he has no decisive political influence. He may act as the keeper of the independent Czech democracy against the totalitarian threat coming from Brussels, but he seems to have problems accepting basic democratic principles. After the ratification of the Lisbon treaty in the Senate, he accused the Senators of having "cowardly failed" and announced to postpone his constitutional signature as long as possible. Apparently he overplayed the situation, as even former supporters distanced themselves from him. Voices coming from the Czech Senate to dispose Klaus from office demonstrate how severe the irritation actually is.

A stable government after the election in October would strengthen the Czech capacity concerning foreign affairs, lack of which will unfortunately remain a bitter aftertaste of the Czech EU presidency. The parliamentary groups of the European Parliament and the European affiliates should support the Czech parties concerning the establishment of a political culture that considers the parliamentary compromise as a success and not as defeat. It was a positive sign that the German Chancellor traveled to Prague in May even though other heads of government were absent from the EU summit on the Eastern Partnership.

Marie-Lena May
<m.may@dgap.org>



Dr. Gereon Schuch
<schuch@dgap.org>